Micro development processes across Europe: a social and political overview

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European Seminar of the ESREA research network on 'Between Global and Local" Adult Learning and Development'

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Community development was developed by the British in their former colonies as a means of enabling local populations to make an orderly transition towards independence. Community development workers were employed to encourage nation building through various forms of participation and self-help. But community development was subject to a dual mandate – development of plausible democratic institutions (on the British model) on the one hand, but also protection of Britain's

economic interests on the other, a mandate characterised by Mayo as ‘civilising whilst exploiting’. This notion of a dual mandate continues to have some resonance in community development today and we may be wise to remember it despite the blandishments of community empowerment.

At the heart of community development, then as today, is a central problematic. As David Jones put it over 30 years ago:

“… while from one side community development is concerned with the encouragement of local initiative and local decision making, from the other it is a means of implementing and expediting national policies at local level.”

The difficulty with this formulation of community development is, first, that it presents a consensus model of society which does not take account of the realities of power and the social relations it gives rise to. Second, the democratic aim expressed in the first part cannot be reduced to the managerial objective expressed in the second part – at least not by claiming community empowerment at the same time. Third, it elides the reality that community development, like all state policy, is intensely ambivalent.

Community work became institutionalised as a distinctive professional intervention in the UK through a policy environment in which public participation was considered to be an essential component in three distinct but interlinked ways: as an enhancement to the exercise of democracy; as a more appropriate and cheaper means of service delivery in a shrinking economy; and as a response to various crises of the state, not least a crisis in political legitimacy. From the outset, therefore, it encapsulated both the aspirations and dilemmas of social democracy: commitment to deepening and extending democratic citizenship and, simultaneously, regulation of that process to politically acceptable limits. Community development is subject to pressures from above, including the state, and from below – from policy and politics. Fourth, politics and policy are different things. There are competing sometimes conflicting or incompatible interests between policy makers and policy takers. What is clear, therefore, is that we cannot avoid the politics of community development. This is particularly important because community development has always laid claim to particular values.

Community development is a hybrid in a range of ways which make it interesting, promising and problematic. First, its origins in the benevolent paternalism of charity and state sponsored social reform *and* autonomous social and political action make

it an uneasy amalgam of very different traditions, but it could also be described to some extent as a microcosm of the tensions which were present in the welfare state itself as it developed in the first half of the twentieth century: welfare and control; change and continuity; a settlement between the needs of capital and the demands of labour; top down and bottom up. Second, it is not possible to understand community development without placing it in the context of the expansion of the welfare state during this period and the professional status which it subsequently gained as a result. Third, it draws upon different epistemologies (psychology, sociology, educational philosophy, social policy and most recently management theory) and competing traditions of social and political theory (liberal, communitarian, Marxist, more recently Feminism and post-modernism). All of this has meant that in practice it has been able to be drawn upon to give credibility to projects which may be inherently controlling as well as those which may be genuinely empowering or liberating. It can act as a critique of the prevailing social and economic order, or reinforce it.

The role of professional community development in the UK has traditionally been to mediate or manage the relationship between the state and its citizens – deployed first in its colonies to ensure an orderly transition to independence and subsequently imported into the post-war UK context to manage the social consequences of rapid technological and economic change.

This role, whilst significant, has essentially been regarded as complementary or marginal to the main business of politics – service-delivery and the sustaining and bolstering of representative democracy. The history of community development shows how community development has been consistently used by government to pre-empt trouble, to deliver policy objectives rather than to challenge power and engage with democracy in any critical way. On the other hand, there is also a UK radical tradition which highlights the potential for community development to be progressive, to work with people to develop a critique of society and their place in it and to take action against powerful interests. As Gary Craig observes,

“Community workers are often called on by government to contribute to the peaceful management of the process of economic change, but our task is patently not to help people to adjust to the insecurity and fragmentation of their lives, but to give voice to their own needs and aspirations above the clamour of communities being disrupted and factory gates being closed.” (Craig, 1998).

In this sense, community development is both a political practice and a professional

practice and practitioners have to work with the ambivalence of this position. However, as Chris Miller editor of the CDJ argues (in Shaw, 2004), there is no other state profession which is charged with the responsibility of extending democracy (however limited or regulated the conception may be), and that offers a distinct opportunity to put contradiction at the centre of practice – as an educational and political resource. Community development in the UK still occupies a uniquely strategic position between formal institutional practices of the state and informal social and political practices of communities. It is this understanding and the space it generates that offers the critical distance necessary to take advantage of such a position in the interests of the most marginalised and excluded groups in society.

This is particularly important in the current context, because the mediating role of community development has been reconfigured in a new and confusing way under Third Way politics with its fused lexicon of enterprise and community – a hybrid discourse in which the democratic impulse of governance meets the managerial imperative of neo-liberalism – with potential dangers for progressive practice. In the restructured welfare state, in the new global order, community development has been offered a central place in policy; no longer marginal and complementary, but critical to legitimacy and delivery. Empowerment has become government policy! With its emphasis on self-help and participation, community development has become an ideal vehicle for turning once public issues back into private troubles, as market principles and practices have demanded value for money, choice and, above all, willing customers. This market hegemony has been institutionalised in various forms of governance, including Scottish devolution itself.

There has been a development in Scottish politics which is congruent with neo-liberal politics everywhere and which is extremely worrying. In the marketised managerial state, community is in danger of becoming a substitute for a depleted welfare state system (eg trading regeneration for degeneration), an alibi for decent state-provided services; a means of service delivery and, increasingly, surveillance.

‘Modernising’ government – joined up or stitched up thinking?
The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 set out the statutory framework for Community Planning which legally requires all local authorities to consult with the electorate.

“The Scottish Executive is committed to people in Scotland having a greater say in how services that affect their lives are planned and delivered.
Community planning has an important role to play in improving public services

through effective public partnership working involving local communities."

Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) have been 'rolled out' across Scotland to take forward key priorities of the Scottish Executive. The partners include service providers (public, voluntary and private) and communities. Examples of Best Practice are to be disseminated on a regular basis throughout the CPPs in order to ensure continuous improvement.

Community learning and development – the new generic term for adult education and community development – has been embedded in the wider framework of community planning and community planning partnerships have overall responsibility for CLD strategies. In other words, the role of professional practitioners is to facilitate or deliver the process of community planning.

Regeneration Outcomes agreements – the strategic and operational framework for CPPs to deliver regeneration: regenerating the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, so that people living there can take advantage of job opportunities and improve their quality of life'. The Scottish Executive is explicit in its preconditions for outcome-based funding: that only those groups that are prepared to address government priorities need apply.

Standards of engagement – Community engagement is at the heart of community planning and National Standards for Community engagement (or ground rules) have been developed to 'improve the experience of all participants involved in community engagement to achieve the highest quality of process and results'. Although there is much talk of consultation, importance of diversity and social justice, the bottom line calculation is clearly the necessity to conform to those all important government priorities.

Finally, the Scottish community development quango, *Communities Scotland* have been inviting community groups into a national organisation **The Community Voices Network** funded by the Scottish Executive and facilitated by private consultants.

"Community Voices Network is a new network, funded by Communities Scotland, which aims to help people from the most disadvantaged communities in Scotland to "get their voices heard" and play a bigger role in the decisions which will affect the regeneration of their communities.
The network helps communities to learn from each other about different

approaches to community regeneration and give them the opportunity to influence national and local policy by providing a collective ‘voice’ for community concerns and issues.”

In other words, they will be provided with the opportunity, training and resources to participate effectively in community planning – under the rhetoric of community action. Managerial discourse can map quite well onto the language of a certain kind of protest eg people power.

“This is seen by some as a means of trying to get communities to embrace policies and practices that are against their own interests. In practice [this] has caused havoc and has, in combination with other factors at work in poor communities, left organisations generally less independent, smaller, weaker and often rather demoralised.” (Collins, 2006)

It must also be emphasised that this has happened in a way which further marginalises locally elected government which is posed as a force of conservatism, against ‘modernisation’. This has the effect of de-politicising politics, by-passing democratically elected representatives through the creation of spurious NGOs which rely on the ‘self-help’ activity of a consultative elite. In other words, the role of the state as a political actor is erased in the formulation of the state as enabling stakeholder. As Collins (2006) has suggested:

“Partnerships … put the emphasis on management, leaving democratic accountability at best indirect. They often give the appearance of promoting top down solutions with little meaningful public involvement. They can also allow Ministers to use their powers of guidance and direction to bypass local democracy creating a more centralised state with less democratic accountability.”

What these developments represent is what has been described as ‘neo corporatism’, a system of representation in which the state confers a monopolistic representational legitimacy on certain organisations and grants them a presence in policy making arenas in exchange for observing some restrictions on their articulation of demands and support for agreements reached through corporatist negotiations (Meade and O’Donovan, 2002). In the process, those conflicts which are seen to have hindered development in the past must be neutralised: ‘axes of inequality or domination’ come to represent ‘axes of identity’ along which social consensus can be brokered and agreed in state mediated partnerships through ‘statutory goodwill’. Such systems may in fact be caricatures of a pluralism in which

only some carefully licensed participants are allowed to play the political game, while others are left on the sidelines, to be brought in on terms acceptable to the main players (Cochrane, in Shaw, 2004)

This is in many ways an audacious attempt at the worst kind of co-option and hopefully will be seen as just that by local community leaders. However, as Sue Kenny observes in the Australian context (2005) community development can become a Trojan horse through which market rationales come to dominate community organisations without even being noticed until it's too late. There is a great need for vigilance. In the absence of other support for community organisations, there is a danger that communities will submit to self-censorship in order to compete for resources and status within the contract culture.

What is of particular significance is that communities are being actively recruited not only for the usual legitimation task which community participation is always in danger of providing, but for the task of actively bringing about the neo-liberal agenda. If this is the case, then it goes beyond co-option and management of consent, to the recruitment of communities as a kind of vanguard of neo-liberalism – softening up those areas where resistance to the market might be expected to be greatest. All of this is happening in the context of the so-called modernising agenda which is explicitly about opening up more and more areas of public life to the market – what is euphemistically called 'Growing Scotland's Economy'. There have been warnings from sceptical commentators that when the Scottish Executive claims it is 'open for business' communities will be a vital part of its portfolio. It is of course the greatest irony if more involvement in participation might actually mean less democracy in any real sense of the word. This is not government by community but *through* community – the dispersed state presented as the democratic alternative. The implications of all this for democracy in any real sense are significant.

First, we all know that this kind of technocratic system cannot create active and engaged citizens. We know that people become activated when they are angry about something and want to take action, or when they want to celebrate something they are proud of, or when they become conscious of injustice, or when they want to learn about something that will make a difference to their lives. What the system described above might achieve is a managed process of manufactured consensus which not only ignores the reality of different interests but also denies the possibility of dissent. Writing from the Irish context, Rosie Meade ( ) observes that in social partnerships communities have become preoccupied with 'the

business of the state' – that despite the best intentions of the community sector, the forums which have been established by the state generate outcomes which are predictably consistent with the state's economic agenda.

There has been a process of centralised decentralisation going on for some time which means that responsibility has been pushed down whilst power has been centralised. In practice, this means that whilst local communities are expected to take increasing responsibility for looking after themselves one way or another, they are managed in such a way as to make it difficult for them to argue or protest. The bureaucratisation of politics through various mechanisms of performance, audit and surveillance produces a conformity which is stifling – and potentially dangerous for democracy.

This brings new problems and possibilities for community workers. Whilst it is argued by some that the new-found status gives communities increased influence at the heart of policy-making, others are concerned that community development workers may have become seriously incorporated, unwitting carriers of the new individualised welfare order, charged with the task of remoralising communities into its logic.

Community development is historically concerned with citizenship and democracy, but there are different ways of understanding what this might mean. If democracy is understood as a managerial procedure which is delivered from above to consumer citizens in a process of consensual change then this leads to a very different practice than if democracy is understood as a social and political process which has to be enacted from below by changing sets of activists, and which is as likely to produce dissent.

There is a problem for community development when policy is mistaken or substituted for politics. The current preoccupation with active citizenship is a case in point. Citizenship is primarily about the relationship between rights and responsibilities. Defining which is which, and the relationship between them is a matter of political judgement, not managerial competence. Active citizenship as policy seems to be concerned principally with extending the responsibilities of citizenship in individualising and moralistic ways. The rights-based citizenship agenda should be at least of equal interest to community development – and that should include the social and political struggles for equality both in and outside of the state.

Historically, the role of CD has been seen in terms of strengthening democratic processes. However, it is important to recognise that there are different kinds of democratic spaces with different kinds of potential. What I have described is what Cornwall (2002) calls ‘invited spaces’ in which certain licensed groups are drawn to participate in top-down forums which are mediated by powerful interests. These spaces can sometimes be filled with people who challenge those interests and gain concessions although they are not usually conducive to the expression of dissent. But it should also be regarded as important, and legitimate, for community development to resource community action which does not conform to policy agendas – those demanded political spaces in which communities retain some degree of autonomy to pursue their own social and political struggles. It is important to recognise that these spaces exist in dynamic relationship to one another and are constantly opening and closing through struggles for legitimacy and resistance, co-optation and transformation. Sometimes dissatisfaction with invited spaces can lead to the creation of demanded spaces and it is important to emphasise the ways in which new social and political groupings and movements are sometimes generated (or old ones resuscitated) in response to policy. The local, national and increasingly global agenda affects the opening and closing of invited spaces. As John Gaventa (2004) argues, much depends on navigating the intersection of relationships which in turn create new boundaries of possibility for action and engagement. This understanding creates a possibility for community development itself as a political space of contestation and challenge, agents of a dialectic between the political culture of the state and the cultural politics of communities.

Perhaps we need to cultivate alliances both in and outside the state controlled sphere. It is important, however, not to abandon the state – perhaps now more than ever. The politics of the state need to be reconstructed in ways which strengthen civil society and political life both outside and inside the state. Despite (or because) of the managerial hegemony, there are signs of dissatisfaction – amongst practitioners, activists, local politicians and some MSPs. Mike Geddes, writing for the Commission for Local Democracy in 1995 argued that democracy was an active process in which the state was itself a political agent, not simply a neutral stakeholder. As such, it should be subject to challenge and change:

“The effective political representation of the interests of poor communities will often mean an ambivalent attitude by those representatives to government and requires a recognition by policy-makers in local authorities that local democracy must be

rooted in and against the local state."

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